

## Interiority, identity and the limits of knowledge in documentary film

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## **Interiority, identity and the limits of knowledge in documentary film**

**THOMAS AUSTIN**

Half an hour into the Maysles brothers' *Salesman* (1968) bible-seller Paul Brennan is filmed sitting alone in a train carriage headed for Chicago. As he stares blankly out of the window Brennan's face remains impassive, offering no indication of his emotions or state of mind, even while the image, in a slow zoom from medium shot to closeup, constitutes an implicit promise of access to some such manifestation of self. In order to overcome the resulting uncertainty of signification, and thereby anchor the meaning of the salesman's face, the Maysles cut away three times to short inserts of Brennan's colleagues boasting about anticipated earnings in an earlier scene. As a consequence, viewers are cued to infer Brennan's anxiety and internalized pressure to perform, whether or not this is what he is actually feeling.<sup>1</sup> I am interested in this sequence not for the ways in which it might fit into familiar debates about direct cinema's interventions into, and mediations of, the profilmic event, but instead for its pertinence to a question that remains underresearched in scholarship on documentary: the delineation of human interiority, whereby the screened other is rendered an object of knowledge and source of affect for the audience. This essay examines a number of films to trace how they variously subscribe to, play with or confound the expectation of gaining access to their protagonists' emotional and psychological depths. In the latter cases, audiences are faced with the limits of their understanding and confronted with the ultimate unknowability of the other.

Neither body nor voice offers a transparent registration of the inner life and feelings of the other. But manifold institutions and discursive practices (science,

medicine, the law, psychoanalysis, photography) have attempted to overcome this opacity and reticence in order to make body and voice intelligible and thus to produce the human subject as knowable. In the cinema, as Marian Keane has noted, ‘the medium of film – and specifically the camera – takes the nature of human interiority as its fundamental subject’.<sup>2</sup> Keane is writing about fiction film, where scripted dialogue, actor performance and the codifications presented by mise en scene, framing, camera movement, editing patterns, lighting and music typically offer cues to characters’ states of mind and emotions. Yet not all of these resources may be readily available, nor deemed appropriate, across the heterogeneous terrain of nonfiction film (even if the explanatory voiceover, once challenged by the influence of direct cinema, is now widely used as a guide to the interiority of social subjects in television documentary and reality television.) Any confrontation with the ‘limits on the expressibility of human interiority’<sup>3</sup> thus presents a particular hermeneutic dilemma for documentary, one that complicates its conventional epistemology, centred as it is on representing and making sense of the profilmic world.

I focus on documentaries that take interiority as a key problematic by staging inquiries into the possibility of, and constraints on, gaining access to the inner life of the other (rather than that of the author). This is not to imply that the other’s self should be thought of as a transcendental or ‘finished’ essence to be captured – quite the reverse.<sup>4</sup> In their different ways, the films under discussion here attest to the necessity of attempting to learn about the screened other, but also to its final unknowability. This is an inescapable consequence of both the mobile, decentred nature of the human self and the mediation of such selves in audiovisual representations of bodies and voices. My argument begins with examples that pursue

traces of a subject assumed to be always already other than the audience: the blind person seen by the sighted, or the child viewed by adults. These largely observational films figure interiority as socially shaped and contingent, but also as commonly located within the single individuals represented.<sup>5</sup> In these works by Sergei Dvortsevov, Yi Seung-Jun, Nicholas Philibert and Jean Pierre Gorin, viewers are prompted to feel with and for those on screen but, crucially, are also kept at a distance from them in ways that foreground the partial nature of the knowledge on offer. I then turn to the role of the documentary interview by briefly considering two films by Errol Morris that investigate participants in controversial events from US history: the Vietnam War and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in Iraq. In these instances, as in many others, audiences are invited to scrutinize interviewees' faces and voices for traces of inner depth, for dissimulation or revelation. In the process, Morris's films attempt to close the distance between the screened other and viewers, who are promised hitherto 'buried' knowledge and emotional truth. The final party inquiry centres on an analysis of Carol Morley's *Dreams of a Life* (2011), an assemblage of recollections and anecdotes about Joyce Vincent, a forty-year-old woman who lay dead and unclaimed in her London bedsit for three years. Vincent is constituted as a spectral offscreen presence, summoned up in interviews with former friends and approximated through a series of reenactments. Intended as a memorial to someone who can never be interviewed, the film can also be understood as a self-reflexive study of the means by which documentary might lay claim to the absent other, and the ultimate restrictions on such a project.

Any effort to find out about another's situation and perspective despite structural differences must negotiate significant ethical and political challenges. The feminist political philosopher Iris Marion Young's concept of 'asymmetrical reciprocity' is pertinent here, providing a paradigm that can be adapted and applied to viewing relations in documentary.<sup>6</sup> Young 'criticize[s] the idea that moral respect entails being able to adopt the standpoint of others' and proposes instead the notion of 'understanding across difference'.<sup>7</sup> She is writing about the politics of reciprocal communication, but her theory can inform a model of documentary spectatorship founded on the notion of asymmetrical openness to the other.<sup>8</sup> Here too, understanding can only proceed via the recognition of asymmetries and the attendant impossibility of attaining a complete understanding of the other. Young argues that

A condition of our communication is that we acknowledge the difference, [the] interval [separating us], that others drag behind them shadows and histories, scars and traces, that do not become present in our communication. Thus we each must be open to learning about the other's perspective, since we cannot take the other person's standpoint and imagine that perspective as our own. This implies that we have the moral humility to acknowledge that even though there may be much I do understand about the other person's perspective [...] there is also always a remainder, much that I do not understand about the other person's experience and perspective.<sup>9</sup>

Young is at pains to point out that this awareness does not necessitate an abandonment of attempts to listen across difference. Instead, 'By learning from others how the world [...] look[s] to them [...] everyone can develop an enlarged understanding of that world [...] that is unavailable to any of them from their own position alone'.<sup>10</sup>

The films under discussion here embody such attempts to learn (both cognitively and emotionally) about the other while signaling, either **explicitly or implicitly**, the constraints on this will to truth and the persistence of a ‘remainder’ in and of the other that exceeds any understanding.

In the audiovisual medium of film, which presumes a sighted audience, sightlessness becomes a readymade signifier of alterity. When a blind person is subjected to the camera’s gaze, the remainder that exceeds understanding can appear almost insurmountable. This dilemma is also productive; the desire to cross so salient a barrier, to somehow share a sightless world, is mobilized as part of the appeal of two films I consider here. Yet the sighted audience inevitably stays outside, looking in on the experience of blindness and reliant on particular audiovisual codings of interiority to do so. Each film registers the lack of a shared perceptual perspective between audience and nonsighted subject, but also records the latter’s acts of mental and physical labour as subjective responses to the world, and as creative contributions to it.

A spirit of asymmetrical openness informs Sergey Dvortsevov’s *In the Dark* (2004), in which the distance between a sighted audience and the film’s subject, an elderly nonsighted man, is acknowledged in the first scene. While the old man feels on the bed for his mischievous cat (‘Bandit! Monster!’) the handheld camera slowly lifts up to catch sight of the pet perched, out of reach, on top of a wardrobe. The disparity in knowledge foregrounded here establishes the impossibility of simply adopting the standpoint of the nonsighted subject, while the film as a whole persists in an attempt to enlarge viewers’ understanding of his life. The ethical cost of such an

inquiry is nevertheless recognized by Dvortsevov, who has since abandoned documentary for fiction film:

The documentary film for me is essentially a terrible thing. I mean [...] when one really wants to penetrate deeply into a person or situation. First you live with that person a long time, you interfere with their life, and then you recreate it and show to others [...] it crushes me to interfere with a private life, since I can turn it into anything I feel like. I feel that it is dangerous for me, for my soul.<sup>11</sup>

Later the old man is shown in tears, after the string bags that he painstakingly weaves to give away on the street are repeatedly ignored or rejected by passers-by (figure 1). The impact of this denial of reciprocity, the refusal to acknowledge the old man's creative efforts, is registered in a sustained closeup of his face as a legible signifier of dismay. This may produce tears of pity from audiences who, in the belated moment of viewing, cannot intervene to solve the problem. *In the Dark* offers no uplifting inspiration or easy moral solution, but at this moment it asserts the veracity of the human face as a straightforward, if rudimentary, index of interiority.<sup>12</sup> Its meanings are dependent both on the bodily topography and movement that are captured in the shot and on its placement at the end of a sequence that moves from the domestic space of the old man's flat to his exposure in the unpredictable setting of the street and back again.

The profilmic response to the creations of the old man in Dvortsevov's film contrasts with the textual authority accorded the South Korean deaf-blind poet Cho Young-chan in *Planet of Snail* (Yi Seung-Jun, 2011). Young-chan's reliance on touch, smell and taste places particular demands on a medium that cannot directly relay any

of these sensory stimuli but has to recode them in audiovisual terms. In early spring Young-chan and his wife Soon-ho climb a hill at the back of some apartment blocks and sit on a bench by a small group of pine trees. Young-chan hugs one of the trees and pats its rough bark, feeling and pressing it, inhaling its scent (figure 2). At this point the live sounds of other people's voices and distant traffic are mixed down and replaced by quiet ambient music, as if gesturing towards Young-chan's interiority, his own embodied knowledge and the sensory impacts of touch and smell. The soundtrack is crucial in this attempt to capture the materiality of Young-chan experiencing the tree, while the imagery recalls Laura Marks's notion of haptic visuality, in which 'vision itself can be tactile'.<sup>13</sup> But *Planet of Snail* does not rely only on these sensory transpositions of the "'unrepresentable" senses' of touch and smell,<sup>14</sup> it supplements them with onscreen reproductions of several of Young-chan's poems, validating them as self-authored expressions of his interiority: 'I am left in space alone. All deaf-blind people have the heart of an astronaut.' Thus viewers are given the opportunity to draw on the work of both filmmaker and poet in order to approach the inner life of the latter. This does not eradicate difference, enabling sighted audiences to simply adopt the standpoint of Young-chan; instead it facilitates a degree of 'understanding across difference', inviting viewers to accept both the value and the limits of this engagement.

A key trope for human interiority, the 'sense of the self within [...] understood to be the product of a personal history',<sup>15</sup> is the figure of the child. In Nicolas Philibert's *Etre et Avoir* (2002), adult understandings of the experience of childhood are often mediated via M. Lopez, the experienced teacher in a tiny rural school in the Auvergne. Yet the film also gestures towards the restrictions on its own knowledge



about childhood interiority, and to a degree that of M. Lopez. This is particularly evident in the case of Nathalie, a very withdrawn girl who turned twelve in the year in which the film was shot. Philibert films M. Lopez talking to Nathalie's mother about her reluctance to speak, and her difficulties with mathematics. Later, towards the end of the film, an uncomfortable scene shows the teacher asking Nathalie how she feels about leaving the village school to attend the local *collège*. He ultimately answers his own questions while Nathalie remains monosyllabic, anxiously scratching at her leg. The film never 'improves' on the frustrations and informational 'inadequacies' of this scene, nor does it 'resolve' the problem of Nathalie's reticence through any ensuing revelatory sequences; instead it registers her inaccessibility. Visible but almost silent, seen but hardly known, Nathalie stays more or less beyond the reach of documentary's epistemological warrant, the limits of which are foregrounded here.

A similar strategy shapes Philibert's representation of patients at La Borde psychiatric clinic as they rehearse a play by Gombrowicz in *La Moindre des Choses* (1997). A suspicion of illness or distress can sometimes be surmised from their gait, posture and dishevelled dress, and is often reiterated by their halting or oddly phrased speech. But beyond this, such bodies remain opaque. Aligned with both La Borde's rejection of traditional hierarchy in psychiatry and the challenge to authority in Gombrowicz's *Operetta*, the film refuses to investigate and fix the patients as case histories or instances of pathology that can be 'made known' to the viewer.

In *Nénette* (2010) Philibert again both recognizes and repudiates the desire for intersubjective relations, this time across a species barrier, when he captures sound recordings of the anthropomorphic fantasies and projections with which visitors attempt to domesticate and render recognizable the inscrutable figure of a forty-year-

old orangutan in the Jardin des Plantes, Paris. He begins by filming Nénette's eyes and face in extreme detail, figuring the desires of both zoo visitors and film audiences to penetrate her interiority. But the film crew, camera and microphone are gradually revealed to be, like the customers, separated from Nénette by a glass wall for their own safety – the institutional correlate of the marketable alterity of the wild animal. Philibert thus acknowledges and attempts to steer between the two contrasting *bêtises* in human–animal relations delineated by Jacques Derrida: anthropomorphic appropriations of the animal for human needs, and the suspension of compassion 'depriving the animal of every power of manifestation, of the desire to manifest to me anything at all, and even to manifest to me in some way its experience of my language'.<sup>16</sup>

The enigma of the child and the complicity of documentary in institutional efforts to decode it is also confronted in Jean Pierre Gorin's *Poto and Cabengo* (1980), which centres on adult attempts to interpret children's voices. Like the body, the voice has been interpreted as an external cue to interiority, even though it too is less than transparent. *Poto and Cabengo* focuses on Grace and Ginnie Kennedy, six-year-old twins whose shared private language (which includes sixteen different ways to pronounce 'potato') is investigated by linguists and thus comes to the attention of the US media. Experts conclude that the girls' idioglossia is a 'defective' creolized language, combining English and German learned from their parents and grandmother. As Vivian Sobchack has noted, the twins' 'unstructured discourse challenges discursive authority; it erupts as a subversive act of authorship which has not been authorized by any social or ideological establishment'.<sup>17</sup> In a series of ironic 'informative' titles which echo subtitled sound recordings of the twins made at a

children's hospital, thus implicating his own documentary practice in the institutional drive to claim them as objects of knowledge, Gorin sends a series of question marks across the screen and announces in text the 'verdict of science' (figure 3). However, he also takes steps to distinguish his film from the disciplinary discourses of science and education. After a sequence showing the girls' separation and entry into different schools, where each is belatedly learning 'correct' English and being 'properly' socialized, a sound recording run over the closing credits plunges the listener back into the disorienting flow of the twins' untranslated language. The move stages an impossible return to a non-compliant and 'dysfunctional' phase of their development, and so offers a fantasy of a childhood free from the normative regimes of language and society. This is, of course, a familiar construction of an unregulated childhood as a lost, irretrievable and almost presocial idyll that exceeds the retrospectively inclined gaze of adult understanding. But it also serves as an acknowledgement of Young's 'remainder', of the final unknowability of the other, whether adult or child.

Like the childhood voices of Ginnie and Gracie, the screened body may also find ways to evade regimes of truth, through what Bill Nichols has called 'its excess of physical specificity and historical situatedness'.<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Grosz notes that the body has long been 'colonized through the discursive practices of the natural sciences'.<sup>19</sup> These, along with dominant western philosophical traditions, promise that its corporeality can be 'reduced to a predictable, knowable transparency'.<sup>20</sup> The body is plumbed for hidden depths, scrutinized, mapped and classified in order to gain truths of the person 'inside' it. In the epistemology of documentary, bodies and the people inhabiting them are conventionally claimed as objects of inquiry (and of play in more heterodox forms).<sup>21</sup> But while it is repeatedly constituted as a knowable

object through a battery of discursive operations, the body's multiple meanings are never exhausted by these procedures. In Grosz's terms, bodies have the capacity to 'seep beyond their domains of control'.<sup>22</sup>

A note on terminology is required here. Metaphors of exteriority and interiority, surface and depth, are prevalent but somewhat reductive figurations of the complex interfaces between body and mind. Grosz augments these with an alternative paradigm, that of the Möbius strip, which she argues is better suited to developing an understanding of 'embodied subjectivity' and 'psychical corporeality':<sup>23</sup>

The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind [...] [it] also provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject [...] the uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside.<sup>24</sup>

While drawing on Grosz's work, I also retain notions of surface and depth in order to further interrogate the assumed relations between the two. One such connection is found in what I call the surface-depth hermeneutic, whereby a bodily or facial surface is presented as a legible cue to the inner depths of the person on screen (as in the case of *In the Dark*). This linkage may be complicated for dramatic or rhetorical effect; or it may be cued only to be refuted, as in the final sequence from *Dreams of a Life*, which I examine in detail below.

In dominant contemporary western cultures at least, the face is always a text to be deciphered, considered the most salient sign of individuality, 'the very locus of subjectivity' as Mary Ann Doane puts it.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps more than any other image in cinema, the closeup of the human face is a surface that conventionally implies

intimate access to, and knowledge of, the 'truth' of the human subject. Yet the materiality of the face can also exceed or refuse intelligibility through its opacity and what Siegfried Kracauer called its 'puzzling indeterminacy'.<sup>26</sup> Jacques Aumont points to the double significance of the face as 'both sensible and legible at the same time',<sup>27</sup> and to its 'hesitation between two poles, that of appearances, of the visible [...] and that of interiority, of the invisible or of the beyond-the visible'.<sup>28</sup> As Doane notes:

Almost all theories of the face come to terms in some way with this opposition between surface and depth, exteriority and interiority. There is always something beyond [...] It is barely possible to see a close-up of a face without asking: what is he/she thinking, feeling, suffering? What is happening beyond what I can see?<sup>29</sup>

Thus the reliability of the face as a visible index of interiority, character, thought and emotion cannot be taken for granted but is always open to question. The possibility of dissimulation, or simply inscrutability, persists.<sup>30</sup> The conventional surface-depth hermeneutic, deployed throughout fiction film from romantic comedy to melodrama to horror, exploits and manages this problem in several, often interrelated, ways.

First, the face may be produced as a straightforwardly legible signifier of interiority, a manifestation or analogue of what lies beneath. Thus traditional physiognomy couples beauty with virtue and ugliness with vice. Second, exteriority (often in concert with the voice) can be used to mislead characters and audiences, playing on their trust in a predictable relationship between the visible and the invisible. In *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013), for instance, Ben Kingsley's character the Mandarin is coded as an evil Islamic terrorist, wearing a beard, topknot and permanent frown, but is ultimately revealed to be a harmless English actor in the pay

of the real (Caucasian) villain. Third, an inexpressive or inscrutable face can pose a question about the intentions, feelings or reliability of a character, in that the surface points to the existence of depths but clarification is delayed or withheld. Thus in Pablo Larraín's *Post Mortem* (2010), Mario (Alfredo Castro) is underplayed throughout so that in the final scene his motives in imprisoning and thereby condemning to death the female neighbour who has been the object of his lust remain ambiguous. He could be read as any one or more of the following: a jealous psychopath; complicit with the violence of the new Pinochet regime; a more reluctant figure, finally acquiescing to the imperative of self-preservation and the collapse of 'neighbourly' mutuality in a society traumatized by the coup against Allende.

The logic of the surface-depth hermeneutic is often harnessed to a hierarchy of knowledge, whereby the viewer is granted access to character information that is withheld from others in the diegesis. A striking instance occurs towards the end of Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* (1962) as Piero (Alain Delon) embraces Vittoria (Monica Vitti). While her back is to the camera, he looks over her shoulder and almost into the camera, thus puncturing the self-sufficiency of the romantic couple. Piero's gaze, unseen by Vittoria, grants the audience an intimation of the impossibility of their romance, one reiterated seconds later when both characters continue the embrace with their faces turned away. This premonition of failure is confirmed at the end of the film when neither Piero nor Vittoria appears at their arranged rendezvous.

In the above cases, the face variously provides, misrepresents or withholds a suggestion of character emotion, personal history, realization or intention that may later be confirmed by narrative events. So how might a surface-depth hermeneutic function in documentary? The documentary interview, with its implicit promise of

exposure or self-revelation, is the most obvious site for audiences to be cued to search for traces of emotional depth and to seek evidence of veracity or dishonesty in the details of the face.<sup>31</sup> Morris frequently invites viewer examination of his subjects by filming them in closeup and medium closeup from a number of angles, using his Megatron system. This technique

allows the speaker to face the camera, the viewer, and the interviewer at the same time. The Interrotron, an apparatus designed especially for this purpose, is ‘essentially a series of modified teleprompters [...] [which] bounces a live image of Morris onto a glass plate in front of the interviewee; the interviewee respond[s] to an image of Morris that floats directly in line with the camera’.<sup>32</sup>

When twenty or more cameras are used in this system, Morris calls it a Megatron.

Morris’s *The Fog of War* (2003) is structured around a single interviewee, former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (figure 4). The use of the Megatron here implicitly promises a penetration beyond surfaces. John Corner borrows the term ‘critical physiognomy’ to consider how the film invites particular scrutiny of McNamara’s face for traces of interiority and emotional or psychological truth:

The politics of *Fog* [sic] are to a degree carried in the face of McNamara, a face regularly seen in close-up, the camera registering its movements of expression, its shifts of mood, what it might suggest about an ‘inner’

McNamara, the microphone picking up the hesitations and the tonal shifts.<sup>33</sup>

In a sequence from a lengthy discussion of the Vietnam War, Morris mobilizes a combination of interview footage, musical score and archival material to query McNamara’s self-presentation. A key element here is the sustained attention paid to

McNamara's face and bodily comportment, which, it is implied, may belie his verbal assertions. A closeup frames McNamara's bespectacled head on the left of the screen, while Morris's voice is heard from offscreen space, asking: 'To what extent did you feel that you were the author of stuff, or that you were an instrument of things outside of your control?' McNamara replies, 'Well, I don't think I felt either, er, I just felt that I was serving at the request of a President who had been elected by the American people and it was my responsibility to help him, er, to carry out the office as he believed was in the interests of our people.' Watching and listening to this response, viewers may engage in critical physiognomy, asking to what extent any unease is registered corporeally as McNamara shifts in his chair and touches his forehead and then his chin, ending his answer with his fist pressed against his mouth. Mournful music plays as Morris cuts to archive footage of McNamara's apparently enthusiastic participation in news conferences about the war (pointing at maps and photographs, even holding up an automatic rifle), then riding in an amphibious personnel carrier, and watching with President Johnson as jets take off from an aircraft carrier. The sequence prompts viewers to read McNamara's body as a facade that tries to screen his inner feelings but fails to do so. Morris's selection of archive material effectively undercuts McNamara's bland, technocratic terminology, encouraging audiences to derive inferences of discomfort and even guilt that McNamara explicitly disavows. Recalling Grosz's Möbius strip, the interview may thus be read as an instance of 'the inflection of mind into body [...] the uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside'.<sup>34</sup>

In Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), the US military police personnel who were imprisoned for prisoner abuses in Abu Ghraib are interviewed



using the Megatron and screened for viewers who have probably already formed conclusions about them from the intense media coverage of the scandal. The film offers these so-called ‘bad apples’ an opportunity to tell their own stories, and gives audiences the chance to examine them for traces of honesty or falsehood. Julia Lesage comments:

As I watch them in close-up talking to the camera, these former guards and interrogators seem sympathetic, yet I know of their terrible acts. As they speak, I search their faces for signs of remorse and any indication that they are lying or telling the truth.<sup>35</sup>

But the interviewees remain somewhat opaque. Angry, defensive or inscrutable, they never appear surprised or led into inadvertently exposing hidden depths, presumably because they have rehearsed their statements many times in legal proceedings and previous media interviews. While the film takes time to attend to these viewpoints, the surface-depth hermeneutic fails to supplement them with any additional revelations. Through its relative failure, *Standard Operating Procedure* throws into relief the expectations and viewing strategies of the conventional documentary interview.

In contrast with Morris’s work, Carol Morley’s films *The Alcohol Years* (2000) and *Dreams of a Life* displace the scrutiny of interviewees as protagonists onto an absent subject, who is accessible primarily via the stories told about them by others in interview. These in turn may reveal something about the witnesses (confused, grieving, smug, angry, curious) as well as the person being recalled. In *The Alcohol Years* Morley’s object of inquiry is herself. She collates twenty-seven interviews in

which former friends and associates recall her promiscuous and drunken behaviour between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one on the fringes of the Manchester music scene in the mid 1980s. This results in an othering of the self: a collage from which only a decentred, incomplete notion of Morley as subject can be derived. Largely invisible behind the camera and barely heard on the soundtrack, she becomes ‘a composite of other people’s ideas’.<sup>36</sup> Dispersed across various anecdotes and produced as ‘knowable’ only fitfully through them, she is always mediated by the workings of memory, friendship, animosity and desire. ‘Carol Morley’ is thus left to be constituted by the viewer, who is confronted with the task of triangulating between interviewees’ accounts, occasional reenactments, very brief archive footage, photographs and contemporary Manchester street scenes. Morley’s interiority and motivation remain irretrievable, but the film incites speculation about them on the part of both audience and interviewees, most explicitly when some suggest connections between her promiscuity and her father’s suicide.

Canonical narrative forms in documentary demand of their human subjects the ‘performance of a lifetime: the condensation of a lifetime into representative moments’.<sup>37</sup> In orthodox biographical documentary, the notion of a more or less coherent, centred, knowable person is constructed via the procedures of interview, observational footage, archive selection, and voiceover narration, which conventionally ascribe meaning and significance to the subject’s life. But Morley’s films interrogate these assumptions and expose the limitations of screen (auto)biography.<sup>38</sup> The absent body and the person it housed can only be approached indirectly via mediations that can never fully capture the desired ‘essence’ of the person. The ‘truths’ of Carol Morley and *Dreams of a Life*’s Joyce Vincent can only

be sought, and never fully found, in the partial, provisional traces and recounted memories recorded by camera and microphone. Who was Joyce Vincent? How did she die? Why was her body left to rot in a bedsit for three years? *Dreams of a Life* hinges on an unresolved tension between the urge to know the truth of Joyce's interiority and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of fulfilling this desire – not just in the particular instance of Joyce, but for documentary as a mode of relating to and representing the world. Over the course of the film Joyce emerges (if at all) as a disunified, contradictory and shifting subject. She is described by one former boyfriend as 'a chameleon, no great drives, no great plans. She wasn't a person with a past and she certainly wasn't a person with a future'; another says that 'when she went out with someone, she sort of became part of that person'. The film proceeds as an inquiry into Joyce's case, in which both its making and watching are presented as necessary steps in the pursuit of the unsolved mystery. But it can only offer a fabrication of Joyce, an assemblage produced from an aggregation of memories, desires, fantasies and regrets.

*Dreams of a Life* is thus structured as a particular kind of puzzle film or mystery. While displacing the investigative function from the onscreen protagonist to the unseen narrational authority of the film, it constitutes a documentary version of that popular fiction genre the detective story, described by Brian McHale as the 'epistemological genre par excellence'.<sup>39</sup> Morley's burgeoning collection of photographs, maps and post-it notes, in addition to a timeline tracing Joyce's various addresses, friends and lovers, recall the evidence boards and inquiry rooms of television police procedurals.<sup>40</sup> Yet despite collating numerous (at times contradictory) recollections, impressions, projections and fantasies about 'who Joyce

was', the film ultimately suggests that her life confounds and exceeds all attempts to render it knowable. *Dreams of a Life* both solicits viewer engagement in a search for truth and confronts audiences with the inevitable inadequacy of the 'evidence' and the failure of any such quest.

The cause of Joyce's death remains unknown, due to the decomposed state of her corpse. Insofar as she can be read as a victim of atrophied social bonds, insecure 'flexible' lifestyles and the anonymity of urban living, she becomes a figure of the precariousness of identity in the 'liquid modernity' of the present historical moment.<sup>41</sup> This symptomatic reading is proffered in interviews with a reporter who covered her inquest and with her local MP. However, quite apart from any such sociological significance, Joyce also stands as an uncanny, fantasmatic figure, elusive and spectral, a lost object who remains beyond retrieval despite the desire of the former friends and acquaintances interviewed in the film, and of viewers, to catch hold of her. In the process, some of the interviewees are themselves subjected to the logic of the surface-depth hermeneutic. The most notable is Martin Lister, who dated Joyce for some time, was perhaps her closest friend, and is described by Morley as 'the hero of the film'.<sup>42</sup> With a highly expressive face, he appears open and self-deprecating, sometimes puzzled but never defensive. However, intimations of a deeper sadness can be detected in the nervous laugh with which he responds to a sound recording of Joyce's voice. Morley's arrangement of Martin's interview material conforms to the surface-depth hermeneutic insofar as the aggregation of short clips scattered through *Dreams of a Life* enables viewers to gradually build a sense of getting to 'know' him. The final and most revealing footage of Martin is kept until four minutes from the end of the film. Shot as usual in closeup, he starts talking while looking offscreen, then offers a

nervous smile. "I wish she'd rung me, 'cos' I would have helped, 'cos I love you.' He suddenly breaks down, crying quietly with his head in his hands. Martin's use of direct address and the slippage into the present tense attest to his continuing emotional attachment to Joyce. Grosz's 'inflection of mind into body' is clearly evident here. Face and voice are shaped by, and function as legible indices of, interiority. But it is precisely this kind of revelatory dynamic that the film queries in relation to Joyce herself.

Until the very last image of the film, *Dreams of a Life* offers very few indexical registrations of Joyce's image (just a handful of still photographs of her with friends or family) although at points it does replay her voice, captured in a song and some short tests for a recording studio. Uncannily emanating from an absent body, this record of her voice emphasizes the paucity of any visual traces of Joyce. Into this evidential void the film inserts a series of reenactments, in which a child plays young Joyce at home and school, and actress Zawe Ashton plays the adult Joyce at work, at home, and in the anonymity of taxis and urban street scenes.

Bill Nichols has written of the complex fantasies and gratifications entwined in documentary reenactments:

unlike the contemporaneous representation of an event [...] the reenactment forfeits its indexical bond to the original event. It draws its fantasmatic power from this very fact. The shift of levels engenders an impossible task for the reenactment: to retrieve a lost object in its original form even as the very act of retrieval generates a new object and a new pleasure.<sup>43</sup>

In the case of Ashton's performance as Joyce, the impossibility of retrieval is registered indirectly by the blankness and ambiguity of many of the reenacted scenes.

Deliberately quotidian and frequently lacking in significant revelatory or transformative moments, they depict Joyce returning home with bags of shopping, confronting dirty washingup in the sink, singing along to soul records, watching television, putting on makeup, riding in taxis. This accumulation of detail hints at an undertow of loneliness and anxiety, which becomes more overt in two particular sequences. In one, a series of tense tracking shots shows Ashton/Joyce walking around the outside of a housing complex, as if seeking someone or something that is never revealed. The other – the longest reenactment in the film – shows her alone in her flat, singing along to Carolyn Crawford's 'My Smile is Just a Frown Turned Upside Down'. The scene codes her as unhappy, but does little to resolve the question of cause.

In these scenes Ashton's body becomes, in Nichols's phrase, 'a body too many', unable to match that which it represents.<sup>44</sup> Not only does the film present viewers with Ashton as a stand-in for Joyce. That other body, once living and now dead, to which the actress's body refers, remains almost entirely absent from the screen, inaccessible both at the film's production (the registration of interviews and reenactments) and its reception. It is not until the film's final sequence that audiences are offered the disclosure of long-withheld video footage of the adult Joyce. Nelson Mandela is shown in closeup talking into a loudhailer, presumably backstage at the 1990 tribute concert held at Wembley Stadium, London, which an interviewee has already recalled Joyce attending. The film cuts to a longshot, filmed from the back of a room or marquee packed with perhaps forty people. The clip is slowed down as a digital zoom moves towards a woman emerging from the crush of bodies on screen left. She is clapping, smiling, and turns away from the direction of Mandela until she

is more or less facing the camera. The camera closes in until her face fills the screen, hair pulled back, a single pale earring glowing against the shadows that surround it (figure 5). The image is held in a freeze frame for twenty-two seconds, as a piano and the wordless harmonies of gospel singers are heard on the soundtrack.

In its anonymous, instrumental recording of the crowd, the (analogue) video footage recalls what Colin MacCabe, following Bazin, terms the ‘indifferent automatism’ of cinema as machine, ‘its automatic reproduction of a reality it cannot intervene to change and its indifference to the audience before which it is projected’.<sup>45</sup> But the arrangement and reshaping of this material within *Dreams of a Life* foregrounds the intervention of a narrational authority purposefully addressing an audience. This address is manifested in the placement of the archive clip as the final, climactic sequence of the film, and in the further ‘enhancements’ of digital zoom, freeze frame and nondiegetic music that combine to announce the moment as significant.

Whatever their expectations at the start of the film, audiences will sooner or later come to view it as an inquiry into the identity and history of the unclaimed body. Thus, at some point they are liable to cross what David Trotter has called the ‘hermeneutic threshold’.<sup>46</sup> This is ‘the point at which interpretation commences’ and a film shifts from captured contingency and materiality (‘sense’ in Trotter’s term) to a system predicated on meaning and prioritizing intelligibility.<sup>47</sup> What the final clip in *Dreams of a Life* does is to both intensify this hermeneutic invitation and to interrogate it. Just at the moment that interpretation is emphatically cued in this sequence, it is disrupted and blocked.

In signaling so overtly its address to an audience, here *Dreams of a Life* both acknowledges and repudiates the desire for a revelatory image that subtends documentary as mode of film practice and viewing strategy. Conventionally the moving image is produced as a source of knowledge about the other, a means of encapsulating a truth of the person figured. The fetishized closeup of Joyce's face mimics this; it is framed and presented for scrutiny but is semiotically insufficient. This is not just due to the degraded picture quality of the frozen video image, but also because, in its opacity, this particular face can never sustain the weight of accumulated projections, recollections, fantasies and speculations that it has been asked to bear. The spectacularized set of exteriorities – eyes, skin, hair – say nothing about Joyce's interiority or about her situation. The image – once random and contingent, an anonymous fragment in the crowd, now privileged by being suspended in time and reframed in space – still cannot solve the mystery of Joyce. It only attests to the demand for resolution. No depths can be inferred from this surface. Joyce's face stilled, held and enlarged is no more revelatory of her interiority than it would be when passing in a blur. It can neither confirm nor contradict any of the interpretive investments with which it is now freighted.

In an essay on Naturalism in literature and film, Trotter notes its 'willingness to become absorbed in the absence of meaning and value', in contrast to the art of observation championed by movements such as the picturesque, 'which requires that the world yield an implicit meaning and a value, if not necessarily for those who inhabit it, then for those who observe them inhabiting it'.<sup>48</sup> *Dreams of a Life* traces some attempts to recuperate Joyce's death (if not her interiority) by rendering her case as emblematic of social breakdown and the anonymity of contemporary urban life.



But the film refrains from fully endorsing this interpretation. Instead it ultimately yields the story of Joyce to ineradicable ambiguity, and leaves its quest for meaning unresolved. Joyce's interiority remains indecipherable, and so too does her symbolic significance. Yet her case is not quite abandoned to formlessness and squalor. If not redeemed as valuable through their final meaning, Joyce's life and death nevertheless become catalysts for the regret, bafflement and unease of those who once knew her, and perhaps for similar responses among those watching the film. This is as far as *Dreams of a Life* can go in extracting 'meaning and value out of existence',<sup>49</sup> and in fulfilling Morley's tentative claim to offer 'a memorial and legacy of sorts'.<sup>50</sup> Far from resolving the inquiry into Joyce's interiority, the final sequence of *Dreams of a Life* emphasizes the **asymptotic** relation of the film to its object of investigation, approaching but never arriving at its impossible destination.

While the documentaries considered here deploy divergent strategies, they all engage with the hermeneutic problem of how to make interiority knowable, and the constraints on this project. From observationalism (Philibert, Dvortsevov), to interview-based pieces (Morris, Morley) these films approach, interrogate and at times play with the stubborn opacity, reticence and inaccessibility of the other. Moreover, films such as *Dreams of a Life*, *Poto and Cabengo*, and *Planet of Snail* make an ethical demand on their audiences, presenting them with both the existence and the impossibility of their desire for the pleasures of knowledge and affect that documentary traditionally mobilizes. In doing so they remind viewers how Young's inevitable 'interval' structures all encounters between self and other. Whether figured as an onscreen presence or recalled as an offscreen one, the other may be invoked,

recorded and displayed, but is never fully captured. By extension, screen documentary as a regime of knowledge must, in its pursuit of the human subject, continue to confront its epistemological limits, the provisional nature of its hermeneutics, and the

- remainder which escapes its understanding. In this sense, rather than obtaining the
- truth of a person, it too might offer only dreams of a life.

<sup>1</sup> This interpretation is retrospectively confirmed by Brennan's decision to quit the business at the end of the film.

<sup>2</sup> Marian Keane, 'Dyer straights: theoretical issues in studies of film acting', *Post Script*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1993), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The point has been interrogated from psychoanalysis to symbolic interactionism.

Erving Goffman suggested that the self was no more than a series of strategies and decisions made in response to the particular and shifting social contexts of everyday

life: 'not an entity half-concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for

managing oneself during them'. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p.

573. And Judith Butler famously argues: 'acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body'. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990) p. 136 (emphasis in original).

<sup>5</sup> The nearest to an exception to this is the case of the twin girls in *Poto and Cabengo*, who are both conflated and individuated. But none of the films suggests a shared cultural interiority or collective memory.

<sup>6</sup> Iris Marion Young, 'Asymmetrical reciprocity: on moral respect, wonder and enlarged thought', in Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 38–59.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 41, 52.

<sup>8</sup> This despite the fact that documentary as a viewing practice lacks mutuality (the spectator watches without themselves being watched), and is structured by an unavoidable asymmetry that separates the viewer from the screened other, both spatially and temporally.

<sup>9</sup> Young, 'Asymmetrical reciprocity', p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Dvortsevov, 'The documentary has morally exhausted me', *DOKweb*, 3 October 2005, <<http://archive.dokweb.net/en/documentary-network/articles/the-documentary-has-morally-exhausted-me-an-interview-with-sergei-dvortsevov-85/>> accessed 29 August 2016.

<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Gary Tarn's *Black Sun* (2005) withholds the image of its nonsighted subject, who remains the unseen source of the film's voiceover.

<sup>13</sup> Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. xvi.

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 4–5 (emphasis in original). Steedman traces this notion in European cultural and scientific discourses of the period.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Willis (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 18 (emphasis in original).

<sup>17</sup> Vivian Sobchack, "'16 ways to pronounce 'potato'": authority and authorship in *Poto and Cabengo*', *Journal of Film and Video*, no. 36 (1984), p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Bill Nichols, 'The ethnographer's tale', *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, (1991), p. 37.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. x.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> A recent challenge to scientific claims made for documentary is found in Agnieszka Piotrowska, 'Psychoanalysis and ethics in documentary film' (London: Routledge, 2013). Piotrowska draws on Lacanian theory and practitioners' experiences to investigate the encounter between filmmaker and subject as a 'space of desire' (p. 2) shaped by complex investments and fantasies on both sides.

<sup>22</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Grosz takes the figure from Lacan, 'who uses it for different purposes'. Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'The close-up: scale and detail in the cinema', *Differences*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2003), p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 46, cited in David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au Cinéma* (Paris: Editions de l'Etoile, 1992), p. 85, cited (and trans.) in Doane, 'The close-up', p. 94. Compare Grosz's discussion of the double function of the skin: 'The information provided by the surface of the skin is both endogenous and exogenous, active and passive, receptive and expressive [...] thus exhibiting the interchangeability of active and passive sensations, of those positions of subject and object, mind and body'. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, pp. 35–36.

<sup>28</sup> Aumont, *Du Visage au Cinéma*, p. 15, cited in Doane, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> Doane, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 96.

<sup>30</sup> Doane suggests that in fiction film, narrative logic may on occasions work to override opacity. She writes of the closeup of Greta Garbo's face at the end of *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933): 'Although Garbo's face here seems to constitute a veritable zero degree of expression, its blankness nevertheless is forced into legibility by the pressure of the narrative culminating in that moment'. Ibid., p. 101. This contrasts with the stubborn illegibility of the face in the final shot of *Dreams of a Life*, discussed below.

<sup>31</sup> A key instance is Shirley Clarke's pioneering yet exploitative *Portrait of Jason* (1967). Filmed overnight in one alcohol-fueled sitting, it offers a frame for its subject's flamboyant self-presentation and storytelling about his life as a black, gay hustler. But through relentless probing and increasingly hostile questioning, the film precipitates the ultimate collapse of Jason's performance into incoherence and despair.

<sup>32</sup> Alex Gerbaz, 'Direct address, ethical imagination and Errol Morris's Interrotron' *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2008), pp. 18, 24, citing Shawn Rosenheim, 'Interrotroning history: Errol Morris and the documentary of the future.', in Vivian Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 221.

<sup>33</sup> John Corner, 'Documenting the political: some issues', *Studies in Documentary Film*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2009), p. 123, citing Merck, 'Fast train coming: the political pedagogy of Fahrenheit 9/11', *Radical Philosophy* 128, 2004. See also Thomas Austin, 'The mists of time: control, chaos and irreversibility in *The Fog of War*', *Studies in Documentary Film*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2012), pp. 29–42.

<sup>34</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. xii.

<sup>35</sup> Julia Lesage, 'Torture documentaries', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary*

*Media*, no. 51 (2009), <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/>

TortureDocumentaries/> accessed 29 August 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Carol Morley, director's commentary on *The Alcohol Years* DVD. She notes that due to her alcohol abuse at the time 'most of the stories I didn't remember at all'.

<sup>37</sup> Nichols, 'The ethnographer's tale', p. 35.

<sup>38</sup> Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1980) is an important precursor here in its use of reenactments and 'autobiographical fiction' to complicate the aesthetic conventions and ethical implications of autobiographical documentary. See Citron, 'Fleeing from documentary: autobiographical film/video and the "ethics of responsibility"', in Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (eds), *Feminism and Documentary* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 276.

<sup>39</sup> Brian McHale, *Constructing postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 147, cited in Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, p. 56.

<sup>40</sup> One post-it note suggests that Joyce may have been a victim of domestic violence.

<sup>41</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), pp. 15–16, 26–32.

Bauman suggests that 'Once identity loses the *social* anchors [such as nation, family, neighbourhood, and workplace] that made it look "natural", predetermined and non-negotiable, "identification" becomes ever more important for the individuals

desperately seeking a "we" to which they may bid for access'. Ibid., p. 24 (emphasis

in original) On links between domestic squalor, economic insecurity and corporeal

disintegration that are adumbrated in the film, see Rose Deller, 'The body that

"melted into the carpet": mortal stains and domestic dissolution in Carol Morley's

*Dreams of a Life*', *InterAlia: Pismo poświęcone studiom queer/A Journal of Queer*

*Studies*, no. 9 (2014).

<sup>42</sup> ‘Carol Morley on *Dreams of a Life*’, Empire online, <<http://www.empireonline.com/interviews/interview.asp?IID=1409>>

<sup>43</sup> Bill Nichols, ‘Documentary reenactment and the fantasmatic subject’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 1, (2008), p. 74.

<sup>44</sup> Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 4

<sup>45</sup> Colin MacCabe, ‘Foreword’, in Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, p. xi.

<sup>46</sup> Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, p. 55.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 53–55. Trotter explicates these concepts through close analysis of DW Griffith’s Biograph shorts. Compare Dai Vaughan’s reminiscence of watching fiction films in his youth and the ‘pang of disappointment’ he felt at the transition from a record of the profilmic marked by contingency, density and mass, to the efficiency of classical narration: ‘It may be that what I sought was unattainable because contradictory: a story composed of uncomposed elements; something which would attain to narrative significance whilst remaining random; a coherence proposed without artifice’. Vaughan, *For Documentary: Twelve Essays* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 113,114.

<sup>48</sup> David Trotter, *The Uses of Phobia: Essays on Literature and Film* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 47-48.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>50</sup> Morley, quoted on the *Dreams of a Life* DVD sleeve.